

Good Shabbos Everyone. The year was 1965, Isaac and Ellen Prager (not their real names) of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania were busy looking for a suitable summer camp for their fifteen-year-old son, Benny. Unfortunately, although the Pragers were "orthodox," they sent their son to public school. While in public school, young Benny became convinced of the virtues of baseball playing. In fact, young Benny had his sights set on making the citywide baseball team the next year. As part of his plans, Benny wished to spend the summer at a baseball camp in Florida. The Pragers were not too happy to hear about their son's request. They knew that it would be next to impossible for their son Benny to maintain any level of religious observance, especially keeping Shabbos, in the non-Jewish summer camp in Florida.

Understandably, the Pragers refused to let their young son attend the Florida camp. As could be predicted, an argument ensued between the parents and their son. There seemed to be no way out of the dispute; both the parents and Benny were insistent.

One day soon after, however, Benny's father saw an ad in the local Jewish newspaper, which caught his eye: "CAMP ZIMRA: ORTHODOX JEWISH CAMP IN THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS OF NEW YORK, FOR HIGH-SCHOOL BOYS, LEARNING BASEBALL, ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS NOW FOR THIS SUMMER." Benny agreed and soon after he boarded the bus for the Catskills to "Camp Zimra." After breakfast on the first day of camp, Benny first realized what kind of camp "Camp Zimra" really was. It was a Torah learning camp. They did play baseball, but only for about an hour in the late afternoon. He and his parents had misread the advertisement. Zimra was a learning and baseball camp; it was not a camp which offered instruction in hitting and fielding. Benny was very disappointed and felt like turning around and going straight home. Not only was there too little baseball at Zimra, but there was also too much Torah study to suit Benny, who had attended Hebrew school only in the afternoons, after public school. "I've never learned Gemara before," Benny announced in bewilderment to his Rebbe on the first morning of shiur (torah lesson), as he and his bunkmates sat around the rickety wooden table in the fresh-air beis midrash (study hall) of Camp Zimra. Before Benny could even think of giving up, however, three of his bunkmates rose to the occasion and volunteered to study with him and help him "catch up" with the rest of class. Benny appreciated the support he received from his fellow campers. Benny actually began to enjoy the learning! To make a long story short, Benny returned home a changed young man. Now he was truly interested in learning Torah, and cared little for sports. Little by little, Benny grew in his Torah study and observance. Eventually, several years later, he got married and he and his wife agreed that they would dedicate their lives to teaching Torah, especially to those who needed it most.

In 1975, Benny and his wife heard of an opportunity to move to Phoenix, Arizona where Benny could take a position in an orthodox Hebrew Day School - The Shemesh Day School. Benny dreamed of such an opportunity, where he could impart Torah values and wisdom into the hearts of children who lived in such a small orthodox community. Benny made some inquiries as to whether Phoenix had a mikveh (a ritual pool), the most essential institution in every Jewish community. (In fact, a community is duty bound to build a mikveh, even before they build a synagogue) Benny was informed that at the time, the closest mikveh was in Tucson, about an hour's drive from Phoenix. After speaking it over with his wife, they decided to accept the position and to move to Phoenix. However, they made up in their minds that unless a mikveh were built in Phoenix within two years of their arrival, they would return to the East coast. When they settled into Phoenix in August 1975, they learned that the drive to the mikveh in Tucson was not always a simple matter. Although it was straight highway driving, the frequent dust storms in the area made the trip difficult and, at times, even hazardous. If the mikveh was going to be built by their private deadline of two years, they realized, they would have to get actively involved themselves. By the end of Benny and Mrs. Pragers' first year in Phoenix, almost two-thirds of the money needed, had been raised. The board of directors of the Shemesh Day School agreed to donate a substantial area of the school grounds for the new mikveh, and construction commenced. The fund-raising and the filing for zoning and building permits were complicated, but all this was not nearly as challenging as satisfying the halachic requirements.

There are two general types of kosher mikvehs: a naturally occurring body of water, such as certain rivers, a spring, or the ocean; or, a *man-made* structure which contains naturally gathered water. For example, in general, the rainwater used for a *man-made* mikveh must fall directly into the pool. In most cities, a mikveh can be built in that way, namely, using rainwater gathered in the mikveh pool. However, this was a problem about Phoenix, which is more or less a desert with little sustained rainfall. Benny and local community leaders were at a loss as to what they could do to get kosher water for their mikveh.

As long as we are speaking about deserts, let us digress a little and speak about this week's Torah portion, *Parshas BaMidbar*, which literally means "*in the wilderness*" or "*in the desert*." The verse refers to the desert where the Jewish nation received the Torah. As we approach the Yom Tov of Shavuot, which celebrates the receiving of the Torah at Har Sinai, let us delve into the Midrash's interpretation as to why the Torah was given in a desert. Among other reasons, the Midrash explains that Hashem gave the Torah in a desert to show that in order for a Jew to acquire Torah knowledge, he must make himself barren and desolate from all foreign ideas. Just as a desert is void of settlement, so too must a Jew's mind be clear of spiritual pollution such as popular "culture," (sic(k)), before he can begin to acquire Torah knowledge. Commentators have added another allegorical reason why Hashem chose the desert as the place to give the Torah. Hashem wanted to teach the generations a lesson about how important it is to keep the Torah, even in the most remote places in the world. Just as the Jews received and upheld the Torah in the barren desert, so too must every Jew uphold the Torah even when he finds himself in a place with little or no Torah institutions. As we see from the story, which we will conclude shortly, Benny and his family worked hard to remain true to their Judaism, even in the spiritually barren Jewish community of Phoenix in the mid 1970's. Let us now conclude the amazing story...

In order to find a halachic solution to the problem of lacking "kosher water" for the mikvah, Rabbi Marcus, a community Rabbi, contacted one of the leading halachic (Jewish legal) authorities of the day, Reb Moshe Feinstein, zt"l. Reb Moshe ruled that in order to build a mikveh in Phoenix, it would be permissible to use snow. The snow would have to be trucked in from the Rocky Mountains! In order not to defile the snow, a special wooden frame would have to be constructed and inserted into the back of the truck to shield the snow from touching the metal walls and floor of the truck. Finally, Benny made all the arrangements for the snow to be brought in the wooden container. However, since the roof of the mikveh was not yet completed, they were not ready to order the snow. However, before they could order the snow, a miraculous event happened in Phoenix: Rain was predicted. Benny acted quickly, removing the tarp, which served as a makeshift roof over the mikveh.

From the morning through the afternoon and into the evening, it rained and rained. None of the old-timers in Phoenix could remember ever seeing it rain so hard for so long. By the time the rain stopped, the mikveh was completely full, with more than the required amount of rainwater. Now, twenty-five years later, the mikveh is still being used as a result of that one, astonishing rainfall. (People who use a mikveh, usually do not immerse themselves directly in the rainwater. Rather, they immerse themselves in replaceable tap water which is connected to an adjacent pool of rainwater.) The day the mikveh was filled with rainwater was April 12, 1976. And it went down in the record books as the heaviest rainfall in the history of Phoenix. Until that date, nothing even came close. And since that day, the record has still not been broken. (From "Zorei'a Tzedakos," by Dr. Meir Wikler, p. 77)

Let us be inspired by this story to always keep the Torah, wherever we may find ourselves, even under the most difficult of circumstances. And then we will see how Hashem extends his kindness to enable us to keep His Mitzvahs even in a spiritual desert. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**